



Why I sail

By Stephen Gauer

Few sailors will admit it, but sailing is mostly about escape. We sail to get away, and often dream of staying away, as though our boats could provide passage to a different and better life. When we push off from the dock, almost giddy with a sense of freedom, we put the land behind us and the sea in front of us, and trust in our skills and a couple of tons of fiberglass, wood and metal to keep us afloat. But we rarely stray far. Six hours later, we close the circle of imagined freedom by stepping back onto the same dock and breathing a sigh of relief to be safe again.

We sometimes handle our boats in difficult and dangerous conditions, and this exercise of skill is part of our escape. Sailing puts us in a simplified world where decisions are tactical, not

moral or political. We don't wrestle with relationships or motives or the meaning of things. We are travellers obsessed with speed and location, with numbers that describe where we are and where we're going and how fast we're moving, and like many travellers we're quite happy to leave our lives behind for a few days, or a few weeks, in order to move through new worlds, knowing that the old world will be waiting for us when we come back.

Escape is possible and comfortable because boats are perfect tiny homes we take to sea with us. I can cook and sleep and eat and travel and read, for days or weeks at a time, all in the space of 25 feet. I have everything I need, in proportions that feel graceful and right. I'm never bored, even though I have no one to talk to. I have no responsibilities except keeping the boat afloat and myself alive. I feel an absurd sense of accomplishment in travelling from point A to point B at five miles an hour. My sailing life is so simple and unambiguous that it seduces me again and again.

Along with escape, comes a reordering of the senses. Time on a boat expands because it flows under my awareness rather than on top of it. My city life encourages close focus and endless hours reading print; on the ocean I can see for miles and miles. From the cockpit, in the middle of the Strait of Georgia, I keep watch on a perfect vault of sky above me, as though I'm standing in the desert staring up at the heavens. Water and sky fill my eyes, and I love that this non-human, long-focus world is both alien and intensely beautiful at the same time.

Melville once wrote that meditation and the sea are wedded forever, and it is true that when you stare at the horizon for many hours a day, as most sailors do, the mind begins to empty, to settle down into a smooth plateau of awareness. The end result, however, is not wisdom or insight, or even clarity, but instead a relaxed simple-mindedness that focuses on sail changes and dinner menus rather than the meaning of life. I have spent many happy days cruising in my boat, without a single useful thought to show for it.

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Imagine this day: I am sitting in my cockpit of my boat, in Queen Charlotte Channel, waiting for wind. There is nothing to do but wait. The sails flap, and the boat rocks gently as the flood tide carries me north, up Howe Sound. It is Saturday afternoon, early in May, and the rain has finally stopped. The sky is brightening to the west. The water moves, as it always does, with apparent direction and purpose. The wind pushes it, the tide bosses it around, and I slip across its surface, making my mark and then watching that mark disappear.

Near Hood Point, I begin to feel wind on my face. A small pressure builds against the sails, and as they fill they assume their proper shape, rounded and full. The flapping stops, and the boat begins to make its way through the water again. A wake forms

behind the stern. I can hear frothing along the waterline. The boat bends over, ever so slightly, as it continues to move forward.

Past Hood Point, the sound opens up to the west, and the wind has the space to run free. It's blowing at about 10 knots now. The water has picked up some chop, just enough to remind me who's in charge of the motion of the boat. The boat is heeling more, and moving through the water with purpose and energy. There are no boats in sight, just a ferry far off in the distance.

The cloud cover thins. To the west, close to the horizon, a thin line of sunlight dances on the water. I'm sailing towards that light now, into the wind, first to the right, then to the left, then to the right again, short, ten-minute tacks that trace a series of right-angle lines in the water. Each tack is a course towards shore that ends suddenly when I push the tiller over and bring the bow of the boat through the wind to the other side. The foresail flaps as I do this, and then fights my decision to change course, and then changes its mind and rushes to its new position while I pull hard on the line that keeps it tight, two loops around the winch to make it easier, and then tie off on a cleat. How many times have I done this? Hundreds, perhaps thousands. I like the tug of the line as the wind fills the foresail. The winds pulls, and I pull back. For a moment I'm the stronger force.

Everything on my boat has a pleasing physical reality. The boat itself is a little worn and bruised. I can run my hand across the dull fiberglass in the cockpit and feel the scars of a thousand trips or more, the dents, gouges, fractures, splits and pits

produced by age, by weather, by dropped tools and careless guests. The teak moulding that frames the companionway entrance leading to the cabin is smooth to the touch, worn a dull gray by constant exposure to the sun and rain. The tiller handle has a few cracks and gouges, and I can see a small splash of blue from last June when I took the rudder off the boat to replace the four main bolts and somehow spilled a drop of bottom paint on the handle.

Because everything on a boat is mechanical, muscle is the prime mover. I sail on a body of water, yes, but I also sail in, out of and through my own body, pulling and coiling lines, manipulating knots, gripping the tiller, and sometimes scraping knuckles or banging a shin. I'm connected to the boat, which in turn is made up of connections because almost everything on it is somehow attached to everything else, by a bolt, or a screw, or a line, or a clamp, or a layer of glue. All of these fittings, these pieces, require inspection and care. The many parts of a boat make for a larger whole.

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Sailing is a kind of performance. And because every performance has a beginning, a middle and an end, we can re-create the performance by turning it into a story. Like actors, sailors talk by telling stories. The difficult trips, the near disasters, make for the best stories because they contain drama and suspense and

conflict. “Our hero takes a trip” is one of the primal stories in Western literature, and it raises the inevitable questions of what will happen on the trip and whether our hero will make it back alive.

The sailor rarely says, “The wind blew so strongly and the waves knocked the boat around so violently I was very scared that something would go wrong and I wouldn’t make it back alive.” The sailor says: “The wind blew thirty knots and the seas were a bit rough but I made it back OK.” This isn’t false bravado, just the recognition that you don’t need to describe fear every time you feel it. Anyone who sails the ocean regularly knows that fear is part of what we do because the ocean is a dangerous place, and the more you sail, the more you’re aware of what can go wrong, how quickly one mistake in bad weather can lead to four more that threaten your safety. Wait too long to change sails when the wind is building and you dismast the boat. Spend thirty seconds staring at the chart instead of the water ahead, hit a log, damage the rudder and lose your steering. Lose your balance and fall overboard and pray for your life.

Fear is normal and healthy, and keeps us alive. The fact that human beings have taken to the sea in boats for thousands of years doesn’t alter the fact that we’re not built to be on the water in the first place, so it seems logical to me that death is a persistent sailing subtext. I think we’re all aware of this life and death dimension of sailing, even if most of us never talk about it. Yes, sailing is fun and feels good, recreates ancient traditions,

brings us cheek to cheek with the natural world, and does all sorts of other noble things, but it also brings us into direct contact with our mortality. We enjoy this because it makes us feel alive, not because we're thrill seekers.

Sailing never fails to remind us that every decision has consequences, and consequences can never be ignored. Anchor in the wrong place, or anchor carelessly and ignore the tide tables, and you will be up at 3 am correcting your error when the wind pipes up or the keel touches bottom. You can curse your own incompetence but you cannot ignore the hard-knock reality of your situation.

This rigid causality breeds caution and diligence. That's good. I like to think that at a certain level, not necessarily a conscious one, fear keeps me on track and careful, like another pair of eyes checking the course that I've plotted, or a second opinion on the anchoring strategy I've devised in unfamiliar waters. It ensures that I always have a backup plan, and usually a backup plan to the backup plan. It slows down my decision making, which is good, and makes me search out every option and alternative before I finally decide what to do.

To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom, Bertrand Russell once said, but he was wrong. Wise sailors don't conquer fear so much as negotiate a lifelong relationship with it. Like many relationships, it waxes and wanes over time. And like many relationships, it's nourished by honesty and self-awareness.

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Imagine a different day: I am awake in the darkness of four am, wrapped in the warmth of a sleeping bag, my head inches from the hull, my body stretched the length of the boat's V-berth. The wind blows up to a crescendo, creating circles of sound around distant treetops, then fades again. I wait. I listen. The same crescendo, the same fade. My heart sinks and my stomach tightens, because I know the trip home will be difficult, sailing into a wind that was supposed to drop during the night but instead has strengthened. When I raise the sails two hours later, a feeble dawn reveals a bland gray sky, but the wind is full of passion and fury.

The small bay of an island protected me overnight, but to get home I must leave that protection and sail down the strait, into the wind, in long, tedious tacks through violently disturbed water while the boat shudders beneath me and the rigging and sails raise a terrible racket. I know exactly what it will feel like and sound like, and sure enough as soon as I clear the bay, and then the island, the waves turn to whitecaps and the wind, now unobstructed and blowing at me with full force from the other end of the strait, is howling.

The boat is strong and hobbles along, into one wave, spraying me with water, and then veering away, rolling off the next, and then heeling in a sudden gust, going over so far that I can barely, just barely hold the tiller with two hands and continue

to steer. In no time at all I'm soaked and my arms are aching. It's impossible to imagine sailing like this for the ten or twelve hours it would take to get home. The waves are less than four feet from trough to crest, but they're tightly packed and steep, and so powerful that the boat spends more time bobbing up and down, and twisting from side to side, than going forward. The sky is as turbulent as the water; above the horizon line I see gangs of scudding clouds headed north, as though fleeing the scene of a crime. There are no other boats to keep me company on this difficult morning, because I'm the only one foolish enough to be out on the strait.

I'm foolish, but I'm happy too. When the sea is rough like this, but the boat is under control, I feel intensely alive. I'm almost ashamed to say this, because the exhilaration I feel is so useless, so unproductive, so unrelated to real life. The boat and I are dancing a fine line between peril and adventure. As I sail, I like to obsess on the peril. I imagine the mast snapping in two, the tiller destroyed by a passing log, the sails shredded when a seam gives way, and as long as I imagine the worst while the worst doesn't happen, I'm fine. This is my trick. Exaggeration swallows fear, like a python gobbling its prey.

And then I weaken, fatigued by the force of the wind and the waves, the spray coming over the side, the gyrations of the boat under me. I give up, because I have the luxury of time to wait for better weather. I turn the boat around and sail back towards the bay of the island that sheltered me. As I reach the lee of the

island, the wind begins to stutter and lose force. I relax. It is only a matter of time now, measured in minutes, until I enter the bay and the water flattens and the wind falters, allowing me to drop the sails, start the engine, and find my anchorage again. I drop the anchor and put the engine into reverse. And when the anchor catches, as it always does, the bow swings once to the right, and once to the left, and then I know I'm safe for the night.