

## **Sailing Past Safety**

by Nadine Canter Barnicle

It caught me—the sound of my zipper as I opened my jacket to avoid overheating walking up the hill towards the glow of the house. Startling me as it did, I couldn't help but wonder why the sound of a zipper pulled at my emotions. Perhaps I was already a bit exposed and the zipper reminded me of other times in my life where I felt vulnerable. Zipping up meant safety. That night I was halfway through the first class in my first writing workshop, Stories in the Land. I had signed up for this workshop knowing this would be a scary and daring adventure.

We had crossed an open meadow to reach the thick and winding octopus arms of a 100-year-old white oak – its bark creased and dry like an elephant's thick skin. Moonbeams lit our walk, the mood was calm, but the anticipation coming from each of my fellow students was palpable. We'd stood under and within this tree – whose horizontal branches seemed to grasp us into a warm embrace – listening to a distant coyote. This tree made me feel safe. Outdoors, especially at night, I mostly feel vulnerable. Yet, I treasure those few nights a year when I zip myself in to a sleeping bag and listen to the loons from the shores of a lake, or the scratching of mice in a lean-to, or even the slither of the scorpion or snake. It depends on the landscape and my very active imagination. Being in nature from the safety of my tent or boat reminds me that I am in fact an active part of this world, I too am an animal and this is my home.

After the communal moment with the white oak, that sound of my zipper brought back memories of other adventures – ones that often make me feel vulnerable and small. Summiting the milestone of turning 50 this past year, I now face that climb back down the mountain, where one slip or chance diagnosis can change everything in a millisecond. It's a vulnerable space – a time to face fears by moving towards them, not away – ensuring I have no regrets by the time I am 80.

Both mountains and the ocean have called to me since I was old enough to walk, and my daily vitamin has never come from a bottle. It comes from sunlight and fresh air. I never take it for granted that my imagination grew up on nature. I spent every summer by the ocean until I was 25, and some summers also involved a month at overnight camp hiking and boating. But it's always the ocean, like the tides that ebb and flow in its waters, that has an inescapable pull on me.

Thirty-seven years ago the zipper on my neon pink rubber slicker was pulled up tight under my chin. The owner had called. We were to take possession of my family's new sailboat on Sunday. First, we had to sail it to our marina for the winter. The weatherman said a fall nor'easter was in the forecast for the weekend. It was October and Long Island Sound was in the

path of a storm, with gale force winds and high seas predicted. But that did not stop the owner, a far more seasoned sailor than my father, from committing us to the day we would sail his boat to our homeport, to make it our boat. My dad had taken the classes, he was ready to take the wheel of his 26-foot sailboat and captain it to dry dock.

I have young parents. There are just 23 years between my dad and me. We share a lot of similarities – both left handed, both love food - almost any food, and he needs the ocean the same way I do. It's in our blood; the ocean is one of the only places true contentment reaches in to our hearts. On that fateful day on Long Island Sound, I was 13 and as the eldest of three girls committed to being the “son” my dad would never have. I had my captain's certificate from sailing dinghies at summer camp. I felt that I was a competent sailor and ready to be first mate. My sea legs were strong from many rocking ferry rides between the Cape and the Vineyard, where up until that time we had spent every summer. My dad and I, we could take on this ocean voyage together, the sea breezes fortifying our constitutions.

My mother had not yet found her calling as armchair apprentice to meteorologist Matt Noyes of New England Cable News, or she would have clearly not let us sail that day. Weather reporting in the 1970s was different, science and technologies were young and cruder – with no “real time” hourly weather updates and predictions. No weather.com on our smart phones. Climate Change? El Nino? We were still putting leaded gas in our cars, the luscious fumes of which my sisters and I breathed in deeply, often for an hour or two waiting in the energy crisis gas lines. Nothing told us this would be a day of adventure and a test of our survival skills. It was a sunny and promising day on the ocean.

My mom and sisters dropped us off at the marina in Fairfield and headed to Clinton. By car the ride to Clinton takes less than 90 minutes. By boat, we could only make an educated guess based on tides and wind patterns. My parents' best friend, Norman, had explained all this to my parents while they were considering this new leisure time adventure. Norman had been sailing Long Island Sound for many years and was overjoyed to hear we'd given up the house in Edgartown with the intent to spend every summer vacation and weekends sailing his waters.

Lunch was packed and Dad had even thrown in a few beers. Ever the optimist, he expected a peaceful day despite the gathering clouds overhead. As the winds picked up, we checked supplies, waved good-bye to my mom and sisters and motored out from the harbor. We were ready for an afternoon of tacking while my father and I learned what we could under the tutelage of this virtual stranger who was happily selling us his boat. My lifejacket zipped up over that pink slicker – and we were off.

We headed east at a decent pace in two to three foot chop carried by a brisk wind. The weather radio had yet to say “small craft advisory.” Or at least we had not heard that. We hoped the stiff wind just meant we'd make good time. Big gusts of wind were not on our radar. Soon enough my dad was struggling to reef in the mainsail (mane-sil for you sailors out there) bloodying his knuckles and nearly slipping into the drink multiple times. This boat had no furling anything (a handy roller system where sails are stored wrapped around a cable) so it was my job to switch from the genoa to the jib in front. Holding on for dear life, I methodically unclipped and clipped the two sails – we needed stability not speed, we made time with minimal sails.

Using the head or staying hydrated were afterthoughts as we struggled to hold a tack that kept the side to side, up and down bobbing at bay.

Lunch forgotten, I was soon feeling seasick – and then found myself vomiting, too. We had following seas so that huge swells of ocean were rolling under us from behind, lifting and dropping the boat stern to bow, stern to bow. I was fighting to control my panic and fear while reeling from the motion of the boat that I could not control. The easiest way to empty my stomach was to sit in the back of the cockpit and heave overboard, while watching the waves roll towards us. The Captain, the happy seller, suggested I take sips of beer. “It will settle her stomach,” he said to my dad. I would have done anything to calm my belly so I quietly sipped on a beer and tried to stay out of the way. I think I’d only tasted a beer once before that day. It was pretty tasteless to my naive palette and did nothing to relieve my nausea.

While we were fighting the winds and doing what we could to keep our heads clear of the boom when we “came about,” Norman and Dianne drove to Clinton to wait with my mom and sisters. Norman had been listening to the weather reports, watching the seas, and he was worried.

There were plenty of towns along the coast between Fairfield and Clinton to find safe harbor. I know them well now – Guilford, Madison, even New Haven must have had a berth for us. I don’t recall ever discussing the option of giving up and going to harbor. While I was trying not to convulse, my father was staying calm. I watched him closely for any signs of, “Oh shit, we are going to die out here.” I only saw calm, though, with maybe a little amazement mixed in. I was anything but calm, but I never let on – I was too busy sipping my beer and throwing up.

On the Island Queen that day (we’d named it for the passenger-only Vineyard ferry) I did my best to steady the seasickness and stay out of the way as each time we tacked we risked jibing or worse, capsizing. I winched in the jib while my dad handled the mainsail line, each time finding it harder to manage than the last.

The cheers from family and friends were loud when we motored in to Cedar Island Marina. With a 600 pound fixed steel keel under us, the Island Queen sure proved her seaworthiness that day. My sense of panic was kept in check, but I let that terror out as I scrambled off the boat straight for the “head” at the marina to clean up. I sat in the bathroom crying, my 13-year-old brain trying to comprehend what it had just experienced. I finally composed myself - was no longer green – neither in pallor nor around the edges.

Today, my 50-year-old self continues to seek out opportunities to balance the vulnerability I feel outdoors on the water or on the trail. The sound of the coyote or the loon reminds me that there is still wild out there – an order beyond the human order we so rigidly impose on our everyday life tethered to electronics. The sound of a zipper in my life still exposes all types of vulnerabilities – even moments filled with love and intimacy. As I grow older and wonder what my children’s life journey will be, the sound of a zipper—from my daughter’s ski jacket or my son’s raincoat—reminds me that there are large forces at play in our

lives, guiding us to and fro. After shedding the terror from that stormy sail at 13, I smile every time I think of it – just like I do after all my life adventures that call for me to turn towards fear and uncertainty – like writing my first personal narrative essay. Mostly, though, in these moments, the smile is just for me.

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*Nadine Canter Barnicle is a strategic communications consultant from central Vermont.*